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Licensed Leadership? Challenging the Orthodoxy of Distributed Leadership in Three Countries

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Abstract

Distributed leadership has commanded expansive interest in contemporary international literature and policy discourse. This interest exists, despite a lack of empirical substance. In each of the two countries in this roundtable, Ireland and Scotland, distributed leadership is now part of the orthodoxy of school leadership. However, despite the rhetoric of involving staff democratically in the leadership of schools, there remains an absence of consensus with regard to how this is both conceptualised and operationalised.

The purpose of this roundtable is to explore a reality that is far more complex than often reflected in the international discourse. Each of the two studies drawn from, sought to explore the extent to which there was genuine evidence of bottom-up leadership, or whether informal leadership from below remained dependent on legitimisation from above.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
GTCS	General Teaching Council of Scotland

Introduction: What do we mean by the term ‘distributed leadership’?

The importance of building leadership capacity within the system is now widely acknowledged (Bjorkman and Ølofsson, 2009; Harris and Spillane, 2008). In that regard, distributed leadership has gained prominence, promoted as an effective way of engaging all teachers in the leadership of the school organisation, commonly accepted and seldom questioned (see Torrance, 2013a). Despite its promotion in the international literature and in the education policies of an increasing number of countries, distributed leadership is seldom defined and inadequately conceptualised. This has led to significant ambiguity in the use and interpretation of the term. More often than not, distributed leadership is promoted as unproblematic.

The authors of this paper recognize the inherent difficulty with defining and conceptualizing a term as yet little researched. They therefore adopt a working definition of leadership offered by Spillane and Coldren (2011: 78) who define leadership as ‘a relationship of social influence’. Within this perspective, leadership is located in a relationship of social influence and as such, expertise rather than formal position forms the basis of authority (Timperley, 2009). Similarly, the authors of this paper adopt a working definition of distributed leadership offered by Harris and Spillane (2008: 31) who use the term ‘distributed leadership perspective’ whereby multiple leaders, regardless of formal recognition, engage in a wide range of leadership and management activities. Within this perspective, ‘leadership and management play out in tandem in practice’ (Spillane and Diamond, 2007: 152-153), since separating the theoretic distinctions between leadership and management is problematic in practice. This perspective of distributed leadership focuses on interactions in leadership practice and the influence of leadership practice on improvement. Those interactions concern ‘both formal and informal leadership and the way they produce different patterns of activity’ (Harris, 2008: 31). In this way, distributed leadership is recognised as having multiple realities, reflecting different ways in which leadership is stretched over leaders, followers and situation in collaborated, coordinated or collective patterns.

How is distributed leadership conceived in the policy rhetoric and practice of Scotland?

The first study draws on a research project involving three case study schools in Scotland. As discussed in Torrance (2013a), Scotland is currently undergoing a significant policy attempt to reconceptualise the teaching profession. This can be seen through the strategic review of teacher education in *Teaching Scotland’s Future* (Donaldson, 2011), the review of teacher employment in *Advancing Professionalism in Teaching* (McCormac, 2011) and the General Teaching Council for Scotland’s *Review of Professional Standards* (GTCS, 2012). The rhetoric within those policy documents has aligned itself to certain principles. Among those principles, is the core principle that leadership should form an integral feature of the role of every qualified teacher. Teacher leadership is premised on and made possible through a distributed perspective on leadership. However, across contemporary Scottish policy documents, defining leadership, distributed leadership and teacher leadership proves problematic. So too does the identification of the expectations and responsibilities related to discrete and complementary roles within school hierarchies, within the suite of revised professional standards (Torrance and Humes, forthcoming).

Six themes emerged from and cut across the research findings of the three Scottish case study schools (see Torrance, 2013a). Distributed leadership was found to be context specific, socially constructed, negotiated and hierarchical in nature, to large extent, ‘in the gift of the headteacher’

and premised on five taken for granted assumptions. The fifth theme was dominant as each headteacher was found to have a central role in encouraging, enabling and facilitating distributed leadership at individual and whole staff levels. The findings of the Scottish study challenge five generally held assumptions identified within the distributed leadership paradigm (see Torrance, 2013b): that every member of staff is able to lead; that every member of staff wishes to lead; that the leadership role of staff is legitimized simply by the headteacher's endorsement; that a distributed perspective occurs naturally; and that a distributed perspective is unproblematic.

How is distributed leadership conceived in the policy rhetoric and practice of Ireland?

The second study draws on a research project involving five case study schools located in the Republic of Ireland. Currently in Ireland, as elsewhere, policy changes are inextricably linked with the idea of school improvement. This is reflected in the recent policy documents such as the 'National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 - 2020' (DES, 2011) and the School Self-Evaluation Guidelines (DES, 2012). These are both aimed at enhancing pupil outcomes, as evidenced on national and international assessments such as PISA, in an attempt to make Ireland more competitive in a globalised economy. Despite austerity, the DES has committed to significant investment in teacher professional development with particular emphasis on "building the capacity of school leadership in literacy and numeracy and supporting teachers in their efforts to improve standards of literacy and numeracy" DES, 2011: 14). School leadership in these documents is conceptualised as meaning the principal or deputy principal.

What happened in practice was the introduction of the literacy/numeracy link model of CPD where teachers were nominated to be responsible for leading literacy/numeracy in their schools. This may be indicative of the hierarchical system which is outlined in legislation and highlights that teachers carry out the duties that are assigned to them by or at the direction of the principal (Government of Ireland, 1998). What remains to be seen is the impact of this cascade model of CPD which in reality involved the Link Teacher attending two-day professional development training in literacy/numeracy with a view to disseminating the learning back in school. The notion of distributed leadership and teacher as leader was promulgated as part of this training despite the lack of specific reference to these concepts in the policy documents.

The research findings from the five case study schools highlight the pivotal role of leadership in teachers' implementation and sustainability of new classroom practices. Moreover, the findings reflect varying notions of legitimised leadership from that which was delegated to that which was supported within the boundaries of meeting the needs and values of the principal. Arguably it may be challenging for leadership to try to build capacity but focus on outcomes (Bell and Bolam, 2010).

Would 'licensed leadership' be a more accurate term than 'distributed leadership'?

The findings of both studies question assumptions of autonomy and agency that underscore the orthodoxy relating to distributed leadership. Rather, these studies found that teachers frequently wait for permission to act and then act within clearly defined boundaries (Torrance, 2013a) often becoming little more than organisers, administrators or managers. The authors posit the notion of 'licensed leadership' (King and Stevenson, forthcoming) as a more accurate description of teacher leadership in schools, in which leadership from below can only be exercised within clearly defined parameters determined by those in senior leadership positions (King, 2011; Torrance, 2013a and 2013c).

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